

Ben Jonson,
The faults of contemporary drama (1612)

BEN JONSON. See the headnote above, p. 454.

TEXT. From *Every Man In His Humour*, the revised (or 'English') version, as printed in the first Folio edition of Jonson's *Works* (1616). The first version of this comedy, in which the characters have Italian names, was performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1598, and printed as a separate Quarto in 1601. The play is known to have been revived at court in February 1605 by the King's Men (as the company was named after King James I's accession), and the wholesale rewriting of it may have taken place on that occasion; if not, then at some time between 1607 and 1612. The Prologue appears for the first time in the Folio, and some scholars have assigned it to the 1605 revision; but Gabriele Jackson, in her edition of the play for the Yale Ben Jonson (New Haven and London, 1969) argues persuasively (pp. 186 ff., 221 ff.) for a dating to 1612. In editing this text I have benefited from her edition and from C. H. Herford, P. and E. Simpson (eds.), *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925-52). The play is dedicated to William Camden, Jonson's master at Westminster School (see pp. 454, 534).

Though need make many poets, and some such
As art and nature have not better'd much;
Yet ours, for want, hath not so loved the stage
As he dare serve th'ill customs of the age:¹
Or purchase your delight at such a rate
As, for it, he himself must justly hate. 5

¹ For similar criticisms of the 'ill customs' and improbabilities of popular drama (throughout Europe) cf. Whetstone, pp. 173-4, and Sidney, pp. 381-2. G. B. Jackson points out that Jonson's wording here is remarkably close to Thomas Shelton's translation of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, printed in 1611-12 by William Stansby (who was printing Jonson's Folio at that time). In part 4, ch. 21, the village Canon attacks modern (Spanish) comedies: 'what greater absurdity can be in such a subject than to see a child come out in the first scene of the first act in his swaddling clouts, and issue in the second already grown a man, yea, a bearded man?' The Canon also attacks the authors of 'modern comedies', these 'notorious fopperies', for claiming that 'they must be such as they be for to please the people's humours, . . . therefore it is better for them to gain good money and means by many, than bare opinion or applause by a few'. Despising the reduction of comedy to 'a vendible merchandise', the Canon invokes Cicero's famous definition (as recorded by Donatus): 'the comedy, as Tully affirms, ought to be a mirror of men's life, a pattern of manners, and an image of truth'.

To make a child, now swaddled, to proceed
Man, and then shoot up, in one beard, and weed
Past threescore years: or, with three rusty swords,
And help of some few foot-and-half-foot words, 10
Fight over York and Lancaster's long wars:²
And in the tiring-house³ bring wounds to scars.
He rather prays, you will be pleas'd to see
One such, today, as other plays should be.
Where neither Chorus wafts you o'er the seas;⁴ 15
Nor creaking throne⁵ comes down, the boys to please;
Nor nimble squib is seen, to make afear'd
The gentlewomen; nor roll'd bullet heard
To say, it thunders; nor tempestuous drum
Rumbles,⁶ to tell you when the storm doth come, 20
But deeds, and language, such as men do use:
And persons, such as comedy would choose
When she would show an image of the times,
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.⁷
Except we make 'em such by loving still 25
Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.
I mean such errors, as you'll all confess
By laughing at them, they deserve no less:
Which when you heartily do, there's hope left then,
You, that have so grac'd monsters,⁸ may like men. 30

² Jonson mocks the English history plays, including Shakespeare's cycle on the Wars of the Roses, acted between 1592 and 1600. Sidney had ridiculed the use of a few actors to represent whole armies (p. 381), as had Shakespeare in *Henry V* (4 Chorus 50). The 'foot-and-half-foot words' renders Horace's *ampullas et sesquipedalia verba* (*Ars P.* 139), which Jonson translated as 'Their bombard-phrase, and foote-and-halfe-foot words'. Accusations of bombast in Elizabethan drama were common, and easily made.

³ The 'tiring [or 'attiring'] house' was the actors' dressing room.

⁴ The Chorus (or *nuntius*) was a single character, one of whose functions was to alert the audience to major changes of scene, as in Heywood's *The Four Prentises of London* (c.1594), where the Chorus 'wafts' the audience to France, Italy, and Ireland, or in *Henry V*, where they are shuttled to and fro across the Channel.

⁵ The Elizabethan public theatre sometimes used a throne descending from 'the heavens' (the roof over the stage, painted with the stars), to represent the descent of goddesses or angels, as in Act 4 of the *Tempest*, when 'Juno descends'.

⁶ Jonson mocks the simple but effective off-stage sound-effects in Elizabethan drama: the 'squib' or firework used to represent thunder and lightning; the rolling of a cannonball over (an upper?) floor, or the use of a bass drum to imitate a storm.

⁷ Blending definitions of comedy by Aristotle and Cicero: cf. Sidney's *Defence*, p. 362 n. 107; and p. 383 n. 194.

⁸ Possibly a reference to Caliban in *The Tempest* (acted 1612); however, the opposition men/monster is basic to much polemical literature on the side of 'nature'.